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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Anglian novelist seems to ask himself four questions: (1) For whom am I writing? (2) What should I write about? (3) Who am I? (4) What is the precise nature of my expression, the means of my communication? A country such as India, divided by some 16 languages has formidable problems of communication, and if one adds the problem of illiteracy, the plight of a professional Indian writer seeking a wide readership becomes readily apparent. In technique and structure, the Indian novel in English is not different from any other novel. It seems to be in search for the exact kind of linguistic expression that suits the Indian temper and pace of thinking and Indian rhythm of talking. In sum, the Indian novel in English is at a crossroads, and although undecided in some ways, it is clearly distinguished by its resolute will to go on, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." (CK)

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The Indian Novel in English: A Search for Identity

"Here's God's plenty," said Dryden of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. With the emergence of democratic consciousness and the greater intercourse of the East with the West in the 20th century, new intellectual horizons have appeared in the literary world of several countries. There has been a new awakening, leading to a vigorous effort on the part of several Asian and African countries to express themselves through the literary medium. In India especially, there has been an upsurge of new literary activity not only in the languages of Indian origin but also in English. Although the English-educated Indians are not so many, the number of Indians who write in English is impressive. Of this group, the novelists and the short story writers are perhaps the most productive, and the quantity and the quality of their output have begun to open up for them a world-wide market. The Indian novelists who write in English are perhaps pushing hard, and the bumper crop of the new harvest is in evidence everywhere. Turn wheresoever one may, he sees a bountiful yield. Though there is much need for weeding, there is much to occupy a serious critic's time.

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Ancient India produced many great things but not a novel as we understand it today. Ā nō bhadrāh rtavō yantu viswatah[1]--may noble thoughts come to us from all sides--said our ancestors some four thousand years ago. They might well have added, noble things too. For the Indian novel and short fiction in their present form, both in English and in the Indian languages, are an importation from the West generally and from England in particular. While we had several forms of literature before, including such things as champu (a composition which employs both the prose and the verse media), the modern Indian novel and the short story owe their existence to the West. The novel existed in Sanskrit as romance at a time when the English language was still in its infancy. Dandin's Dasakumāracharita (6th century), Bāna's Kādambari (7th century) and Subandhu's Vāsavadatta (7th century) have been considered standard works of fiction. An English scholar called Horrwitz says that "Bâna has written the best Sanskrit novel."[2] Indeed, the word kādambari is used at least in three Indian languages (Kannada, Telugu and Marāthi) to denote a novel.

Even the short story in its present form as a complex, subtle, and highly artistic work is a borrowing from the West. Of course, ancient India was a treasure trove of short fiction, and we exported a good quantity

of it to the West and appeared to have got in return the modern short story. It is common knowledge that stories like those of the Panchatantra[3] with their device of the frame story travelled West and influenced Western literatures, including Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Today some of them exist in the West in modified, garbled or changed versions, such as the Welsh story of Llewellyn's dog, Gelert.[4] The very story of the migration of these tales is a fascinating one. The Oxford scholar Macdonell holds that "the history of how Indian fairy tales and fables migrated from one country to another, to nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia, and even to African tribes from their original home in India, borders on the marvellous."[5] But the modern Indian fiction is Western in its origin and inspiration. When the Indians awoke to what are now the most popular forms of literature among the authors and the reading public in India, namely the short story and the novel, they must have said to themselves, "But Westward look, the land is bright!"[6]

The novel is a well-established form in Indian languages, without a readily visible trace, if I may say so, of foreignness about it, although it is perfectly clear that the novels and the novelists have often been inspired by Western models, including the English, the European (not excluding the Russian) and the American.

However, the story of the Indian novel in English is somewhat different. From its hesitant beginnings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Indian novel in English has had a somewhat different story to tell. Despite the fact that it is past its nonage and has even come out of the 'hothouse' it was in for sometime, it still wears an undecided look. An air of tentativeness seems to linger about it. It is apparently in search of its identity, its self-definition. The Indo-Anglian novelist seems to ask himself four questions: 1. For whom am I writing? 2. What should I write about? 3. Who am I--what is my identity? 4. What is the precise nature of my expression, the means of my communication?

Anyone who has some familiarity with Sanskrit, the ancient classical language of India, knows that while it has a large number of compound words (samāsas) it does not have even one instance of a compound word formed with any word outside the language, including the languages of Indian origin. Such a compound word would be called an ari-samāsa and was held to be a sin. The result of it was that the language gradually came to be petrified and ceased to be a living thing. Indo-Anglian writing, by which I mean Indian writing in English (as opposed to Anglo-Indian writing or the writing of an Englishman, such as Thackeray or Kipling, using India as a background) has,

till the present time, been regarded as a kind of arisamāsa, or an unholy wedlock of two incompatibles--the content of one culture and the expression of another clime. In a basically traditional-minded society it suffers for its illegitimacy. Perhaps even now its reading is secretly looked down upon as infra dig by the English-trained intellectual highbrows of university affiliation. In the recent years, however, because of the Western interest in Indo-Anglian writing, Indian teachers and critics began to accept the writings of their fellow countrymen, though not, one suspects, wholeheartedly. The assumption is that when an Indian literary work receives attention in the West it must be good. But, of course, in the beginning years of Indo-Anglian writing the Englishmen did not think it possible for the non-Englishman to produce works of literary value in the imperial language. Some even sneered at the efforts of the pioneers. Gordon Bottomley seems to have sneeringly remarked, "Matthew Arnold in a sari."[7] Indians themselves did not, and still do not, have much confidence in the ability of their countrymen to write in English. Although at times when put on the defensive in the course of an emotional argument they point out proudly the Indian mastery of English as evidenced in Nehru's and Gandhi's writings, generally they consider them second

best, picking even at the excellent prose style of a writer like Nehru for what they are pleased to call grammatical errors. Consequently, questions of readership, contents and style arise, and while there are no final answers to these questions, a look at some of the novels of the more prominent novelists like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Kamala Markandaya may help us get an insight into the nature of this search for identity.

A country divided by some sixteen language has formidable problems of communication, and if we add the problem of illiteracy, we can easily appreciate the plight of a professional Indian writer seeking a wide readership. English is the only language that can cut across the regional boundaries in India but in doing so, it creates a new caste of a small minority of snobbish people who remain largely alienated from their culture and permanently isolated from the common man. Indo-Anglian novels, unless prescribed as textbooks for university classes, have no significant prospect of selling well. The college graduates with their questionable mastery of English are inclined to read, like most others, novels in their own mothertongue rather than in English. Foreigners travelling in India and sometimes trying to buy the novels of the better known novelists have been disappointed at not finding them in bookstores.[8] Naturally, the Indo-Anglian novelist has

to look beyond the national boundaries, though he or she can never completely rule out the possibility of readership at home. A writer like R. K. Narayan, who clearly writes for the educated Indians (as his style, sentence structure and vocabulary show), is lucky enough to find more readers abroad than at home. Several of his novels have been published by the Viking Press and the Michigan State University Press. Other novelists like Kamala Markandaya clearly aim at a Western audience. In some of her novels we find the writer's evident consciousness of a non-Indian audience. In what appears to be a kind of glossary, she explains, "DEEPAVALI, the Festival of Lights, approached."[9] Then again she says, "They pay their respects in silence, and when the sun has risen, the men pick up their bier and depart; but the women stay behind, for this is the custom."[10] In another novel, we see this kind of explanatory commentary. "That new year went by," Miss Markandaya records, "then it was the Telugu new year, then the Tamil, for in India the year has many birthdays."[11] Elsewhere in the same novel she adds, "Malaria. If you are born and live in India, you are, naturally, aware of it."[12] In any case a large number of English novels written especially in the recent years carry a glossary of Indian terms, another indication

that the manuscript was prepared primarily for a non-Indian market.

Again, the nature of the contents of a novel and sometimes the novelist's apparent consciousness of a purpose can contribute to the tentative air of a novel, leaving it half-way from being a work of art. In a number of novels, such as those of Miss Markandaya or Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope, we run across not only characters of the East and the West but also a sort of East-West theme. One wonders whether it is a divided kind of appeal that the writer has in mind. Markandaya's Possession is a biting satire on the British occupation of India with a highly possessive and materialistic kind of British lady for its central figure. Some of the Western book reviewers did not obviously enjoy the satire, and perhaps for this reason (and maybe for other reasons also), the most recent of her novels, Coffer Dams, shows at least some English characters as capable of understanding and sympathy for India. Several of the novels of Mulk Raj Anand written in the 1930's have imbued in them not only a strongly leftist leaning but a conscious propagandistic purpose of reforming the Hindu society. The works that readily come to our mind are the Coolie, the Untouchable and Two Leaves and a Bud. If we compare Anand's Untouchable, which E. M. Forster praised so much, with a

novel of the same name by Hazari some two decades later, we see how much of a sociological document of a propagandistic nature is Anand's work. Clearly aimed at arousing the conscience of the English-educated Indians, Anand's work subdues the sensitive imagination of a literary writer and is evidently unable to transcend the temptation to make propaganda. A similar preoccupation with a theme results, as in several novels of Markandaya, in paying less attention to characterization, symbolism, metaphor and imagery. We can only hope that the Indian novelists will decide some day where to put their primary emphasis in their attempt to create works of enduring literary value.

There is yet another aspect of this search of the Indo-Anglian novelists. In some of the languages of India the latest tendency in plotting is to go back to the ancient heritage of the country or its near-ancient history, such as in Kannada. This search seems to become even more important for the expatriate Indian writers writing in English. Cut away from their home, they clearly long to seek an identity of a national, cultural and personal nature. Outside Balachandra Rajan's Dark Dancer, where the central character discovers the wisdom of ancient India, Raja Rao in his The Serpent and the Rope has a conspicuous example of this kind of search. The

hero of the novel, like the author, is a brahmin who has transplanted himself to a foreign country, where he lives with a foreign wife. A surge of emotional attachment to the country and his heritage takes him to the homeland and the exploration for his identity begins. As we know, the author himself goes to India and spends periods of time at a spiritual retreat in south India. In this most philosophic of all Indo-Anglian novels, the hero is too clearly trying to seek his identity. It is a novel of the expression of a most inward personal search. Likewise, Miss Markandaya, born of a south Indian brahmin family (she still claims to belong to it), transplanted to England and married to a Britisher, frequently visits India. In all her novels, while she shows the need for modernizing and does not quite oppose material progress in the country, she clearly anchors her faith in ancient India's wisdom and spiritual heritage. Two of her novels, A Silence of Desire and Possession have the character of a swami or a holy man, who is the symbol of the spirit and who remains unvanquished before physical and material forces. At one point in Possession she writes:

> The true Indian ascetic--and in my mind I had no doubt the Swamy was one--is not a parish priest, a missionary, a revivalist, concerned with keeping tabs on a human being to plot his spiritual progress. His whole aim is to achieve detachment from the world:

> and even if the Swamy could not completely master his heart, it seemed unlikely he would seek to continue an earthly attachment by letter-writing.[13]

In technique and structure, the Indian novel in English is no different from any other novel. It has advanced from the simple initial sketches and plain straightforward narratives to more complex and sophisticated works, though there is yet room for improvement. But the Indian novel in English seems to be clearly on the search for another thing--the exact kind of linguistic expression that suits the Indian temper and pace of thinking and Indian rhythm of talking. Even a successful writer like R. K. Narayan, who has apparently found his happy blend of thought and expression, is conscious of the experiment that appears to be going on. Narayan uses the English, if I may say so, mainly of educated Indians. We hear the Indian voice in the English of his characters. But of the need for a suitable language, he writes:

> In order not to lose the excellence of this medium a few writers in India took to writing in English, and produced a literature that was perhaps not first-class; often the writing seemed imitative, halting, inapt, or an awkward translation of a vernacular rhetoric, mode or idiom; but occasionally it was brilliant. We are still experimentalists. I may straightaway explain what we do not attempt to do. We are not attempting to write Anglo-Saxon English. The English language, through sheer resilience and mobility, is now undergoing a process of Indianization in

> the same manner as it adopted the U. S. citizenship over a century ago. . . . I cannot say whether this process of transmutation is to be viewed as an enrichment of the English language or a debasement of it. All that I am able to confirm, after nearly thirty years of writing, is that it has served my purpose admirably, of conveying unambiguously the thoughts and acts of a set of personalities, who flourish in a small town located in a corner of South India.[14]

However, as early as the 1930's Raja Rao saw this problem. In his preface to Kanthapura, he wrote:

> The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word "alien," yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up--like Sanskrit or Persian was before--but not of our emotional make-up. . . . We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.
>
> After language the next problem is that of style. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs.[15]

Anyone who cares to know how a writer can bend the flexible English language to suit the Indian rhythm of speaking needs only to read Raja Rao's Kanthapura. Sometimes the effects might be hilarious as in some of the following passages but surely they also illustrate the search for a perfect medium of expression for the

Indo-Anglian novel.

> If rains come not, you fall at her feet and say "Kenchamma, goddess, you are not kind to us. Our fields are full of younglings and you have given us no water. Tell us, Kenchamma, why do you seek to make our stomachs burn?" (p. 2).
>
> "O sage," pronounced Brahma, "is it greater for you to ask or for me to say 'Yea'? Siva himself will forthwith go and incarnate himself on the earth. . . ." (p. 11).
>
> But Bhatta goes on munching and belching, drinking water and then munching again. "Rama-Rama. Rama-Rama." One does not have an obsequial dinner every day. And then, once the holy meal is over, there is the coconut and the two rupees, and if it is the That-house people it is five, and the Post-office-house people two-eight. That is the rule. (p. 21).

In a short story entitled "Akkayya" we have another instance of a slightly different kind. The situation is one of domestic quarrel.

> "You dirty whore, you dog-born, you donkey's wife, this is how you come when I call you! I have been shouting for you for hours. . . . . You dirty donkey-whore! Why don't you all let me die? Leave me, throw me into the well and drink a good, hot seer of milk? You would, wouldn't you?"[16]

Raja Rao's Kanthapura as well as the story mentioned here is, in fact, Kannada fiction written in English. For a thorough appreciation of these works, we need to know the rhythm and style of speaking in Kannada. All this, however, merely establishes how the Indian novelist is in search of a proper medium of expression suited to his purpose. In sum, we may say that the Indian novel in English is at crossroads, and although undecided in some

ways, it is clearly distinguished by its resolute will to go on, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Footnotes

[1]Rgveda, I. 89:1.

[2]E. Horrwitz, A Short History of Indian Literature (London, 1907), p. 137.

[3]The compound word panchatantra literally stands for five ways in which one can get on. Punch is originally an Indian drink with five ingredients. See Horrwitz, p. 140, f.n. Even today on certain festive occasions as well as religious days the Indians use panchāmrita (five nectars).

[4]A. A. Macdonell discusses this in his book India's Past (Delhi, 1956), p. 127 ff., originally published by the Oxford University Press.

[5]Ibid., p. 119.

[6]This familiar quotation from Arthur Hugh Clough's "Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth" is not intended to suggest any gloom in the then intellectual milieu of India.

[7]K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Indian Writing in English. (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 7.

[8]For example, see Roland E. Wolseley, "Narayan of India," The Nation, XVII (October 3, 1953), 273-274. He

pointedly says that the novels of Narayan were not available in Bangalore, capital of Mysore State, 86 miles from Mysore, where Narayan lives.

[9]Kamala Markandaya, Nectar in a Sieve (New York: The John Day Company, 1955), p. 76. Emphasis mine.

[10]Ibid., p. 125. Emphasis mine.

[11]Some Inner Fury (New York: The John Day Company, 1956), p. 71. Emphasis mine.

[12]Ibid., p. 162. Emphasis mine.

[13](London: Putnam, 1963), p. 61.

[14]R. K. Narayan, "English in India," Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in Common Culture, ed. John Press (London: Heinemann, 1965), p. 123.

[15]Raja Rao, Kanthapura (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. vii. First published in 1938.

[16]Raja Rao, "Akkayya," The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 92.